

## “Spiritual Gifts from God: Part Three”

The past two Sundays I have taught about the Spiritual Gifts from God that have been given to those who belong to the church of God. The first and foremost gift was the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Then, to all who believe in Jesus Christ for salvation, spiritual gifts were given that we may serve God and one another.

**1Corinthians 12:1**, “Concerning spiritual *gifts*, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.” **4-5**, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord.” **7**, “But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” **13-14**, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many.” **18**, “But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.” **27**, “Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it.”

Every believer has been gifted to serve in the body of Christ, the church of God (cf. **Romans 12:6-8**) **prophecy** [proclaiming God's Word], **serving** [minister to the basic needs of believers], **teaching** [to interpret and explain God’s Word], **exhorting** [to encourage obedience to God's Word], **giving** [to generously and cheerfully give to those in need], **leading** [to guide or govern by example, with diligence], **showing mercy** [expressing compassion and empathy, in order to lessen another’s burdens and comfort their sorrows].

Read **Acts 1:1-5, 9-15**... Jesus was crucified and buried, but He rose from the grave and then appeared to hundreds of His followers over a 40 day period, after which, He ascended back into heaven.

Read **Acts 2:1, 4-5, 7-8**... God’s Spirit came to those 120 faithful believers, who then began to proclaim God’s message in the languages of Jews who had come from outside of Israel (listed: 5 people groups, 11 regions) **vv. 9-11a**), **verse 11b**, “we hear them in our *own* tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.”

By **Acts 2:41**, the number of believers had increased from 120 to about 3,120; and (**verse 42**) they continued to meet together, devoting themselves to God's Word, Fellowship, Communion, and Prayer and (**2:47**), “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. ”

By **Acts 4:4**, the number of believing men increased to about 5,000 (adding women and children, that number could have easily been 20,000 believers); and it didn’t stop growing (**Acts 5:14**), “And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to *their number*.”

Satan attempts to disrupt the growth and spread of God’s Church.

Read **Acts 4:32-5:16**... Ananias and Sapphira (a wealthy couple who converted to Christianity) had attempted to lie to God about the amount of money they had received for the sale of their property, and given to the apostles to be used for needs of the growing church. They didn’t need to lie about it, it was their property they sold; but it would appear that they wanted to be held in high esteem by saying that they gave all the money from the sale to the Apostles, this lie then, was not just to the Apostles, but to God, for the Holy Spirit of God was in them, and so, it cost them their lives. This struck fear among the people, but as we just read, it did not inhibit the growth of the true church of God.

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Read **Acts 5:18-21, 25-27, 33-34, 38-42...** Peter and John were repeatedly arrested, beaten, and threatened, but this did not deter the church from praising God or inhibit the church from growing.

Read **Acts 6:1-6...** It was very difficult for 12 apostles to care for such a large crowd of people's spiritual needs, let alone for the physical needs of so many who had come from other regions, and were now without the support of their own homes, extended families, and personal finances (no debit/credit cards).

It would appear that Satan continued to try and retard or perhaps extinguish growth in the church and cause chaos among those coming to Christ. There was a growing conflict between the Hebraic and the Hellenistic Jews; which could have easily hindered and disrupted the church's witness and growth, if it was not resolved quickly.

The Grecian (Hellenistic) Jews were Greek speaking Christian Jews who had been raised in Greek cultures. The Hebrew and Aramaic speaking Jews were native to Israel. The conflict centered around the daily distribution of food to widows; it was complained by the Grecian Jews that their widows were being overlooked, probably due to the rapid growth of the church, and because they were a minority they weren't being treated equal to the native Hebrew widows.

This problem [complaint] could have intensified into a split or division in the church (no denominations yet). The care for widows in Jewish society was expected and taught in the OT (**Deuteronomy 24:19-21**), “When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow.”

It is also taught in the NT (**1 Timothy 5:3-5**), “Honor widows who are widows indeed; but if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God. Now she who is a widow indeed and who has been left alone, has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day.” **8**, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” **16**, “If any woman who is a believer has *dependent* widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.”

The Apostles were aware of the problem, but they did not want to neglect their main responsibilities: Prayer and Proclamation of the Word of God (**6:2-4**), “in order to serve tables,” so they called the people together, and sought to “select from among [the believers] seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. [So they could continue to] devote [themselves] to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

With probably 20,000 or more people in the church at this time, the 12 apostles were very busy, praying to God and receiving God's Word to proclaim among the people, to equip, encourage, and exhort the believers, while shepherding and overseeing the growing flock of God.

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The seven men who were selected in Acts 6, to serve, were not officially “deacons,” because neither of the two offices ordained by God for the church, that of Pastor-Elder-Overseer, and that of Deacon, had yet been instituted by God, according to the NT chronology.

Paul writes (**Ephesians 4:12**), that prophets, apostles, pastor-teachers were given by God to the church “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”

At this point in the narrative of the church, the apostles had been put in place to lead and care for those who were placing their faith in Christ; eventually, leadership and oversight would go to the men who would serve as pastor-elder-overseer, whom God would call from among the people, to govern and shepherd the church of God.

The church was rapidly growing, and it was not in its best interest for the spiritual leaders to devote so much of their time to the collection, safeguard, and distribution of the finances and resources of the Church, which were being used to provide for the needs of this growing family of believers.

The apostles brought God's Word to the church, and although they didn't have Bibles, commentaries, CD's, or DVD's, they had spent three years being personally taught by God's Son, and now God's Spirit [Spirit of Christ, **Romans 8:9; 1Peter 1:11**] lived in them and reminded them of everything Christ had done and said, along with being given new revelation to proclaim to the people.

**1Peter 1:20-21**, “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is *a matter* of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

Jesus Christ crucified, resurrected, and coming again, should be the major topic and main content of the sermons being given by pastor-teachers today.

The apostles had instructed the people to choose seven men from among the body of believers; men who were known for their integrity and faithfulness (**Acts 6:3**), men “who are known to be full of the Spirit of God and God's wisdom.”

The believers choose these seven men from the family of God; all of these men (cf. **Acts 6:5**) were godly Grecian Jews [Greek names] who knew the needs of the Grecian widows better than anyone. They were brought before the apostles, who would make the final decision (**Acts 6:6**), “the apostles prayed and laid their hands on them,” setting apart these seven men for a specific work, and affirming God's support for them to carry out this serving ministry of purchasing food for the daily distribution among those in need.

The church had grown so rapidly, it was no wonder some people's needs were being overlooked. This problem was causing discord between the Jewish nationals and the Jewish transplants, all of them believers; it could have easily escalated into a major division between them, but the apostles, empowered and led by God's Spirit's, maintained unity among this large fellowship of believers, so that they remained one in mind and spirit, unified as the family of God, though made up of many different cultures and traditions.

These seven men (mid-30's A.D.) carried out some of the functions that deacons would later perform when the office of Deacon [*diakonos*, “one who serves,” “one who ministers” *within the flock of God*] was officially instituted (mid- 60's A.D.) with the qualifications being given in **1Timothy 3:8-13**.

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There is no mention of deacons anywhere in the book of Acts; but a plurality of men holding the office of elder-pastor-overseer is clearly referred to (**Acts 14:23**), “When they (Paul and Barnabas) had appointed **elders** in every church... they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed,” (**Acts 20:1**), “From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the **elders** of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them (**Acts 20:28**), “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to **shepherd** the church of God which He purchased with His own blood,” although the qualifications for pastor-elder-overseer weren’t given until 64-65 A.D. (**1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9**).

Devotion to God's Word, Prayer, Christian Fellowship, and Celebrating the Lord's Supper, all of these main priorities of the early church brought honor, glory, and praise to God, and caused the church to grow; and very soon, persecution would cause many in the church to leave Jerusalem to go into Judea, to Samaria, and to the very ends of the earth (cf. **Acts 1:8**).

Read **8:1-4...** One of the seven men who the apostles had set apart to care for the daily needs of the church in **Acts 6**, Stephen, had just delivered a fantastic message of rebuke to the Sanhedrin (**Acts 7**), declaring how men just like them (self-righteous hypocrites) had persecuted the prophets sent to them by God, and had killed the Messiah, who had come to save them.

The religious leaders (Pharisees, Sadducees, Priests, Teachers of the Law) thought they had ridded themselves of their major nemesis, Jesus of Nazareth and those who believed in and followed Him.

The followers of Christ did not remain silent after Jesus’ ascension; in fact, they were proclaiming the risen Christ in the streets of Jerusalem, even at the Temple. Repeatedly Peter and John the main leaders of the church in Jerusalem, had been arrested, beaten, and threatened, but they wouldn't be silenced.

Stephen had spoken to the religious leaders with power and wisdom, as if he were the teacher and they were the students; their response was to have him stoned to death and Saul (later to be called Paul, **Acts 13:9**) was right there giving approval to his death (**Acts 7:58**), “When they had driven him [Stephen] out of the city, they *began* stoning *him*; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.”

See again **Acts 8:1-3...** Up to this point, most of the persecution toward Christ's followers had been directed toward the leaders, the apostles. But now the persecution was going to come upon all those who confessed and followed Jesus.

The believers began to scatter, except for the apostles who stayed to evangelize Jerusalem; in fact, many fled from Jerusalem and went to Judea and Samaria after Stephen was laid to rest, for Saul was intent on destroying the church.

Read **Acts 8:4-8...** Persecution didn't silence the followers of Christ or put out their fire; instead, it seemed to spread and ignite in other places driven by a new found courage. Philip, like Stephen, was one of the seven men who had been set apart by the apostles in chapter 6. Philip goes to Samaria to proclaim Christ while also healing the lame and demon possessed, as Jesus had done many times.

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God is amazing! He now uses persecution against the church, to send the believers, who have become very comfortable in their Christian fellowship in Jerusalem (cf. **Acts 2:42-47**), to now go to Judea, Samaria, and to the outer parts of the earth, in order take God's message into the world.

Philip (**Acts 8:5**) is the first missionary mentioned in the Scriptures. Do you remember when Jesus (cf. **Acts 1:8**) told His followers to proclaim the gospel first in Jerusalem, then Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

As these first believers and followers of Christ spread out across Israel and its neighboring regions/countries, Pastor-Elder-Overseers would be put in place to provide care and leadership for the many churches that were being founded; likewise, there arose a need for Deacons to serve the many needs of the members of the Church of God, wherever groups/flocks of God's people gathered together.

Next time together we will look at the specific qualifications and duties given in Scripture for the two offices ordained by God to serve His Church: Pastor-Elder-Overseers, and Deacons.

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